

Eight Rockets

a novel

and

Stepping Back from the Rail: Watching and Writing Eight Rockets

an exegesis

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of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Date: 15 October 2013

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Abstract

In my novel *Eight Rockets* and its accompanying exegesis *Stepping Back from the Rail* I offer a new way of thinking and writing about a particular and peculiar aspect of the *Titanic* disaster. The disaster is one of the most famous and mythologised events of our time, but what is less well known is that a nearby ship saw her distress rockets and did not respond to them. My exegesis and novel explore this incident and grapple with possible modes of its creative representation. My work inhabits the fraught zone between history and fiction, but I hope that it lights a way through and offers a strategy for reconciling the demands of historical truth and the fictional novel. Linda Hutcheon's central notion of 'installing and problematising' allows my novel to play a double game: to insist upon the truth of a particular representation of a historical event and its actors, but also to make overt the subjective and contingent processes involved in constructing such a representation.

In my exegesis I describe my initial attempts to write a 'scientific history' of the *Californian* incident and how these attempts suffocated under a dense weight of detail. I explain how I gave up the struggle to control the facts and instead placed the task of representing the 'truth' into the hands of an invented narrator. Process became part of the product: instead of telling the story of the *Californian* my novel told a story about telling stories.

My novel aims to disrupt and unsettle early 20th century discourses of heroic men, difficult women and the silent poor. My work explores representations of third class passengers in the *Titanic* archive, concludes that they only ever appear as an undifferentiated mass, and seeks to rectify this by giving voice to a specific, historical third class family.

My novel and exegesis together make a statement about what it is to write 'historically' by taking as their subject real 'historical referents' – Captain Lord, Herbert Stone and their actions on the *Californian* and afterwards. I resist Frederic Jameson's nostalgia for an authentic, fully-knowable referent and argue instead that even a referent sensed imperfectly – as a wispy hologram, or a haunting revenant, or an icy presence in the darkness – can nonetheless have its own kind of magic and

power. Further, I argue that my narrator's 'failure' fully to possess or explain Lord is paradoxically my novel's success. By dramatising Lord's resistance to interpretation the novel offers an answer to the conundrum at the centre of the *Californian* tragedy: why Lord did not respond to the *Titanic*'s rockets.

Finally, my novel offers a fable about meaning-seeking generally. In the end my narrator 'steps back from the rail' and is content to know Lord imperfectly from a distance. Perhaps in so doing he teaches us to see value in the quest for meaning rather than in any final meaning itself. Lord, like life, resists any final interpretation.

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